Stress-Timed vs Syllable-Timed Languages

(1) The hills are alive with the sound of music

(2) Sur le pont d’Avignon
The hills are alive with the sound of music

Sur le pont d’Avignon
A repeating pattern of syllables.

Table 1: The definition of the foot for various metrical types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metrical Type</th>
<th>Definition of the Foot</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>The foot is a pattern of long and short syllables</td>
<td>Latin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syllabic</td>
<td>No feet; lines have a fixed number of syllables irrespective of syllable length or stress</td>
<td>French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accentual</td>
<td>The foot comprises a single primary stress along with any associated syllables of no or weaker stress</td>
<td>Old English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accentual-syllabic</td>
<td>The foot comprises a single primary stress as well as a specified number of syllables of no or weaker stress</td>
<td>Modern English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Common Feet in Modern English Verse

- Trochee: /x/
- Iamb: x/
- Dactyl: /xx
- Anapest xx/
Feet and the Verse Line 1/2

- Trochaic trimeter: three falling feet to a line, one unstressed syllable per foot
- Iambic tetrameter: four rising feet to a line, one unstressed syllable per foot
- Anapestic pentameter: five rising feet to a line, two unstressed syllables per foot

etc.

(3) Those petty wrongs that liberty commits

Shakespeare, Sonnet 41 l. 1
Wikipedia Article Titles
With the right syllable stress pattern
to be sung to the tune of the original
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Theme song

Ace Ventura: Pet Detective

Biggest Loser: Second Chances
Cayman Island Blue Iguana
Central Texas Pocket Gopher
Church of Jesus Christ Creator
Climate Change and Meat Production
Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon
Daylight Saving Time in China
Denver Airport People Mover
Easter Island Spiny Lobster

Asian Human Rights

Figure 1: XKCD, “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles,” detail; CC-BY-NC Randall Munroe
Classical Modern English Verse Lines 1/2: Iambic Pentameter

- $x/x/x/x/x/$
- Imported from Italian by Chaucer
- When unrhymed, referred to as “blank verse”

(4) When forty winters shall besiege thy brow

Shakespeare, Sonnet 21. 1
Iambic tetrameter (x/x/x/x/) alternating with iambic trimeter (x/x/x/), in four-line stanzas

There is a house in New Orleans
It’s called the rising sun
It’s been the ruin of many a poor girl
Great God, and I for one

*The House of the Rising Sun*, ur-text, verse 1
Is Iambic Verse an Odd Choice for a Root-Stressed Language?

- Germanic stress is on the root syllable
Is Iambic Verse an Odd Choice for a Root-Stressed Language?

- Germanic stress is on the root syllable
- Loan words sometimes follow the stress pattern of the source language
- Germanic phrases often begin with an unstressed element such as a preposition, adverb, or prefix
Modern English metres are syllable-counting metres, but unstressed syllables are not always strictly counted:

(5) There is a house in New Orleans

It’s called the rising sun

It’s been the ruin of many a poor girl

Great God, and I for one

*The House of the Rising Sun*, ur-text, verse 1
Modern metres frequently assign stress to syllables that are not normally stressed in speech:

(6) Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Shakespeare, Sonnet 116 l. 1

Thus the iambic foot is not always a perfect match for English prosody.
In modern iambic verse, feet often begin or end mid-word:

(7) When forty winters shall besiege thy brow 

Shakespeare, *Sonnet 2* l. 1

(8) They call the rising sun 

*The House of the Rising Sun* l. 2

Thus the iambic foot is not always a perfect match for English prosody.

(See further the video on Words and Feet.)
Caesura

Any metrical pause, usually suggested by the phrasing (i.e. between syntactic constituents).

▶ In Old English verse, required between the on-verse and the off-verse, and visualized in print as extra space:

```
Oft Scyld Scēfing  sceahena þrēatum
monegum mǣgþum  meodosetla oftēah,
```

*Beowulf* 4–5
Caesura

Any metrical pause, usually suggested by the phrasing (i.e. between syntactic constituents).

▶ In Old English verse, required between the on-verse and the off-verse, and visualized in print as extra space:

Oft Scyld Scēfing sceāpena þrēatum
monegum mǣghum meodosetla oftēah,

Beowulf 4–5

▶ In Bliss’s system, each verse also has two “breath-groups” (i.e. feet) separated by a caesura, while each compound has a less marked “pseudo-caesura”:

Oft | Scyld Scēfing || sceāpena | þrēatum
monegum | mǣghum || meodosetla | oftēah,

Beowulf 4–5
Enjambment

In modern verse, any non-occurrence of a metrical pause between verse lines, as suggested by the syntax (and typically by the absence of punctuation at line-end):

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
\times & / & \times & / & \times & / & \times & / \\
\end{array}
\]

Let me not to the marriage of true minds

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
\times & / & \times & / & \times & / & \times & / \\
\end{array}
\]

Admit impediments. Love is not love

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
\times & / & \times & / & \times & / & \times & / \\
\end{array}
\]

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Shakespeare, *Sonnet 116* ll. 1–3
Enjambment

In modern verse, any non-occurrence of a metrical pause between verse lines, as suggested by the syntax (and typically by the absence of punctuation at line-end):

(9)  Let me not to the marriage of true minds
     Admit impediments. Love is not love
     Which alters when it alteration finds,

Shakespeare, *Sonnet 116* ll. 1–3

Not as useful with reference to Old English verse, but here

- Verse boundaries show a certain syntactic integrity (e.g. do not end in a preposition)
- Foot boundaries coincide with word boundaries (if a compound is counted as two words)

Any transgression of these tendencies is called a **bracketing mismatch**.  

(Russom §1.5.2)
Bibliography
